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Using Young Adult Literature to Confront Mental Health: A Culturally Relevant Approach

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Abstract

This thesis highlights the need for addressing mental health in secondary school settings and argues that high school English educators can help eliminate the stigma surrounding mental illness using young adult (YA) literature. I discuss the benefits of using YA literature in the secondary English classroom and why YA literature is an effective tool for introducing timely topics like mental health. I analyze the limitations of popular YA novels such as Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* and Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* and argue that the mental health representation in these novels hinders students' ability to challenge the current stereotypes and stigma surrounding mental health. To address these limitations, I argue that teachers should use the principles of social justice and culturally relevant pedagogy when evaluating YA texts about mental health. To demonstrate this evaluation, I examine a more positive and accurate representation of mental health in Emery Lord's *When We Collided*. I also discuss the lack of diverse and inclusive representation in books that approach the subject of mental health, specifically focusing on the underrepresentation of students of color and students of low socioeconomic status. Through the discussion of diverse texts such as Erika Sánchez's *I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* and Matthew Quick's *Boy21*, I examine the importance of diverse and inclusive representation in YA literature about mental health. Finally, I offer practical ways educators can teach these texts and help students meet the objectives of social justice learning and culturally relevant pedagogy. I maintain that through this type of learning, students will not only have a better chance for academic success but will also have the skills necessary to act against the current social inequities regarding mental health. This culturally relevant approach enables English educators to confront mental health in a way that accounts for and reaches *all* students.

Dedication

For Lucas

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Introduction

When I began my first year as a high school English teacher, I had plenty of goals in mind—improve my students' reading and writing skills, increase their ability to think critically and creatively, and, of course, prepare them for the rigors of college. I also knew that my students would come into the classroom with unique backgrounds I would need to take into account if I hoped to have a meaningful impact on each one of them. I felt prepared to address their individual needs and excited to accomplish the goals I had set for my students and myself. It was not long into my first year, however, that this feeling of preparedness diminished. A student approached me before school one day to express her concerns about a friend who was contemplating suicide. As a teacher who had gained her trust, she came to me hoping I had a solution to this difficult situation. I did my best to encourage her to talk to his parents or the school counselor, but it was clear that neither of us felt comfortable talking about this subject, and it never came up again. Over the next couple of years, similar incidents occurred. One student often expressed to me her fears about her depression, and multiple students discussed some sort of experience with mental illness in their creative or reflective writing. Despite these circumstances, mental health never became a topic of discussion in my classroom; I continued to believe that this topic was reserved for the school counselors or the health teacher.

Then, after my third year of teaching, the most eye-opening experience occurred—I found out a former student of mine had completed suicide at the age of 18. He had been a sophomore during my first year of teaching, an A student in my class, a talented musician in the band, and an involved member of his church. Two years later, he

was a senior in my English 12 class, still a member of the band and his church, but not quite the A student he had been previously. I blamed "senioritis" for this change. He also stayed after school much longer than most students, not to hang out with friends but usually to chat with teachers like me or the science teacher across the hall. I figured he was just waiting for band practice to start. After hearing about his tragedy, I tried to think back to the possible signs I missed. I thought about the fact that we read *Things Fall Apart* and *Julius Caesar* his sophomore year and *Macbeth* his senior year—all stories that involve suicide; yet, I could not remember having a serious conversation about these scenes. We discussed the historical context, characterization, and tragic elements behind these literary choices, but that was all they were—literary choices. Two years later, I still cannot help thinking about what I could have done to prevent this tragedy. Teachers have an opportunity to reach students, to tackle the sticky issues, and I missed my opportunity. Now, when I return to the classroom, I hope to confront the issue of mental health with my students, specifically through the use of young adult (YA) literature.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), one in five teens and young adults live with a mental health condition ("Teens"). Despite these high numbers, the subject of mental health has not been given the attention it deserves, especially in school—the place where young adults spend most of their time. The reluctance to introduce conversations about mental health into academic settings is likely due in large part to the stigma surrounding mental illnesses. According to a 2007 study (Rose et al.) that identified over 200 labels used by young adults to stigmatize mental illness, people who struggle with mental illnesses are often labeled "disturbed," "crazy," or "mental" (Richmond 19). Because of this stigma, people are encouraged to stay silent

about mental health, yet the fact remains that young adults are susceptible to the very mental illnesses they stigmatize. According to NAMI, 11% of youth have a mood disorder; 10% have a behavior or conduct disorder; and 8% have an anxiety disorder ("Mental Health Facts"); yet the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration tells us that, in 2014, only one-third of young adults with a mental illness received mental health services. According to Dr. Karen Hochman, an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Emory University School of Medicine, young adults should not "delay treatment because of stigma or the belief that having a mental illness means that there's something inherently bad or wrong about [them]" (qtd. in Tarugu). However, these are often the reasons that mental illnesses go untreated. These harmful perceptions of mental illness are only amplified by the absence of mental health discussions in school settings.

While the stigma of mental illness encourages students to stay silent about mental health, teachers easily fall prey to this silence as well. In their article "Raising 'Hot Topics' through Young Adult Literature," Groenke et al., expanding on young adult author Chris Crutcher's thoughts on "taboo topics," maintain that by avoiding these topics, "[educators] contribute to their stigmatization in society; that, in turn, makes it harder for adolescents to break their silence as victims and/or to disrupt dominant discourses and the status quo" (29-30). For these reasons, the stigma surrounding mental illness must be eliminated, and it is my belief that teachers have the ability and responsibility to assist in this elimination. Studies have proven that bringing the conversation of mental health into a school setting helps to eliminate these prejudices. In their article, "Impact of a Mental Health Teaching Programme on Adolescents," Naylor

et al. discuss their study in which experimental classes in a secondary school received a six-lesson teaching intervention on mental health, while control classes in another secondary school did not. The lessons focused on "mental health issues common to young people: stress; depression; suicide/self-harm; eating disorders; being bullied; and intellectual disability" (Naylor et al. 365). At the end of the study, the researchers found that the students who received the lessons on mental health "showed significantly more sensitivity and empathy towards people with mental health difficulties" (Naylor et al. 365). The findings also indicated that, in comparison to the students who did not receive the teaching intervention, the students in the experimental classes "became less prejudiced and were also less likely to use pejorative terms to stigmatize people with mental health difficulties as a result of the intervention" (Naylor et al. 368). This research proves that if educators take the time to have meaningful conversations about mental health with their students, they can effect positive change. A teaching intervention such as this, however, only touches the surface of what needs to be done in order to eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will discuss the benefits of using YA literature in the secondary English classroom and, furthermore, why YA literature is an effective tool for introducing timely topics like mental health into the classroom. This chapter will then examine how educators and education scholars are already looking to popular YA novels such as Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* and Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* to address issues of mental health. During this examination, I will analyze the limitations of these texts, including how they fall short in regard to mental health

representation and argue that they may actually hinder students' ability to challenge the current stereotypes and stigma surrounding mental illness.

In order to address these limitations, I will argue in Chapter Two that teachers should use the principles of social justice and culturally relevant pedagogy when evaluating YA texts about mental health. This chapter will discuss more positive and accurate representations of mental health in texts such as Emery Lord's *When We Collided* and explain how implementing these texts can help educators accomplish the objectives of social justice and culturally relevant teaching. I will also discuss the lack of diverse and inclusive representation in books that approach the subject of mental health. Specifically, students of color and students of low socioeconomic status are often underrepresented in these texts. I will highlight the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy as defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings and the components of social justice education to discuss how these pedagogical theories can enhance the teaching of YA literature with diverse texts such as Erika Sánchez's *I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* and Matthew Quick's *Boy21*. Through the discussion of these texts and pedagogical frameworks, I will examine the importance of diverse and inclusive representation in YA literature and especially in YA literature about mental health.

Chapter Three is devoted to the methodology of how educators can apply a social justice and culturally relevant framework to the teaching of these texts. In particular, these frameworks require students to critically analyze the sociopolitical issues surrounding mental health, in tum encouraging them to take action against the status quo. In other words, while it is important for students to be aware of the social inequities surrounding mental health, they must also recognize the systems of power that enable

these inequities, so they may then discover practical ways in which they can enact positive social change. I will use Heather W. Hackman's "Five Essential Components for Social Justice Education" to offer practical ways in which educators can use the texts discussed in Chapter Two to help students meet the objectives of social justice learning and, with the the inclusion of a culturally relevant approach, develop what Ladson-Billings refers to as "cultural competence" and "sociopolitical consciousness" ("Yes, But How" 35-37). Through this type of learning, students will not only have a better chance for academic success but will also have the skills necessary to start taking action against the social inequities regarding mental health. By applying the principles of culturally relevant and social justice pedagogy to their teaching practices, it is my belief that secondary English educators can confront mental health in a way that accounts for and reaches *all* students.

Chapter One:

Young Adult Literature and Mental Health

The Benefits of YA Literature and YA Literature About Mental Health

In the past, some educators have maintained the misconception that "young adult literature is for struggling, reluctant readers only" (Scherff and Groenke 1); however, educators today are beginning to realize that all students can benefit from the reading of YA literature. In particular, YA literature offers an insight into contemporary issues and realities in a way that is not only accessible for young readers but also relatable to them. Although many canonical texts possess timely themes that foster connections to important topics in today's society, students often struggle to interpret these themes through a contemporary lens when they do not see themselves represented in the text (Bishop, "Mirrors"; Nieto). It is easier for students to bridge this gap when reading about experiences that directly connect to their own lives and the lives of their peers. According to Lisa Scherff and Susan Groenke, "We know that adolescents like young adult novels because, unlike classical, canonical works, they have been written *about* adolescents, *with adolescent readers in mind*" (2, emphasis in original). Furthermore, excluding young adult literature from the English curriculum may actually hinder students' engagement in learning because its absence devalues their experiences. In their article "Young Adult Literature in Today's Classroom," Scherff and Groenke recall Chris Crutcher's words at the 2007 Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the NCTE (ALAN) conference: "When we omit young adult literature from our classrooms, we say to students that the kids in those books, and their lives, don't matter" (2). Crutcher further argued that "teenagers' reading habits and their out-of-school lives must matter in today's classrooms

if we don't want to foster the disconnect many adolescents associate with school" (Scherff and Groenke 2). The purpose of young adult literature is not just to engage students with reading but to also remind them that, as young adults, they have important stories and voices that are meant to be heard.

YA literature provides a platform for teachers and students to discuss topics that otherwise seem out of reach in a secondary, academic setting. In regard to mental health, some of the canonical works typically found in high school English classrooms do feature characters who experience mental health struggles (e.g. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth*); however, as Kia Jane Richmond points out in her article "Using Literature to Confront the Stigma of Mental Illness, Teach Empathy, and Break Stereotypes," "most are not the focus of the pieces nor easily accessible to teen readers" (20). On the other hand, because young adult literature—specifically contemporary realistic fiction—presents timely topics from a young adult's perspective, it is easier for students to approach and discuss these topics because they are presented as meaningful and relevant to their own lives and experiences. In his work "With Themes for All: The Universality of the Young Adult Novel," Ted Hipple identifies global yet sometimes sensitive themes present in YA literature such as alienation, friendship, family, death, mental illness, sex, and drugs and alcohol. According to Hipple, YA literature "must be read with attention, not simply to its story lines, characters, or settings but also and very importantly to its themes" (2). I refer to these themes as "sensitive" because while young adults are frequently exposed to these aspects of reality outside of the classroom, many adults view these topics as inappropriate for school settings. While some educators may be reluctant to address these topics in the classroom for this reason, it is unreasonable to

think students are not affected in some way by these aspects of realities every day and, thus, will not benefit from analyzing and discussing these themes through accessible literature.

Mental health is one topic that educators may avoid in the classroom despite the fact that many of their students are either directly or indirectly impacted by mental illness. While not all students will have had personal experiences with mental illness, reading literature about mental health is still beneficial for all students. According to Pam B. Cole, these stories serve two purposes: "(1) they provide characters with whom teens with disabilities can identify, helping them understand that they are not alone, and (2) well-written, accurate stories help healthy teens understand teens who are disabled or sick and help all teens realize that other teens face similar obstacles" (139). While some people may hesitate to consider mental illness a disability, the Americans with Disabilities Act defines disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities;" and mental illnesses such as anxiety disorder, depression, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorder and schizophrenia are classified as mental impairments ("Mental Health Conditions"). It is useful for students to understand mental illness as a disability because this classification contributes to the stigmas and stereotypes surrounding mental health. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for young adults to "other" those who are dissimilar to them, often resulting in bullying, discrimination, or stereotypes; but reading stories that highlight the similarities between many teens' experiences can change this narrative. As middle school teacher Jill Henderson states in her article "Disabilities, Attitudes, and Young Adult Literature: Teaching *Freak the Mighty* in a Regular Education Language Arts Class,"

"struggles to accept differences of color, culture, religion, and ability occur in the classroom, too, and come from deep places that need to be explored in order to be understood" (12). YA literature opens up avenues for this exploration and encourages students to confront and challenge preconceived notions about aspects of identity such as mental health.

Henderson further states that "because young adult literature features adolescent protagonists experiencing adolescent issues, many teachers who use young adult literature believe the genre encourages empathy and critical thinking among readers" (12). For instance, by thinking critically about YA texts that feature characters living with a mental illness, students who read these texts from an outsider's perspective can begin to recognize the realities of mental health disorders, in turn, building empathy instead of relying on stereotypes to form their opinions. Richmond points out that "helping students develop empathy is part of our mission as educators, especially in a humanities class whose goal is to examine texts focused on understanding the human condition" (23). To build this knowledge and empathy successfully, teachers must take the time to evaluate the authenticity of the texts they bring into their classrooms, especially texts representing a disability experience. It is also important, however, for students to recognize that any one story is just that—a single representation of what one's experience with mental illness might look like. By thinking critically about these stories, students can also discuss the importance of acknowledging one person's experiences with mental illness as just one example of a multifaceted experience and one part of his or her multifaceted identity. These are essential steps educators and students must take if we wish to eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health.

Judith A. Hayn elaborates on the importance of evaluating the types of texts teachers bring into their classroom in her article "Facilitating Inclusion: Young Adult Literature as a Tool." According to Hayn:

> The inclusion of literature where individuals with disabilities, conditions, and/or illnesses are portrayed as functional, independent, and proactive role models in realistic settings is one positive approach to achieving these desired goals; in so doing, we promote awareness, sensitivity, and tolerance of individual differences, while combating many of the issues related to peer and social rejection. (9)

As Hayn indicates, it is not enough to introduce any text or texts featuring characters with disabilities. In the context of mental health representation, educators must take on the responsibility of ensuring these texts offer positive messages about mental health and demonstrate the reality of young adults living positive and productive lives while also coping with a mental illness. Hayn maintains that "well-chosen texts can be useful in helping ease fears and anxieties caused by ignorance, thus replacing negative stereotypes with knowledge," but she also reminds us that "it is the educator who must choose to get these texts into the hands of students, both those with disabilities and those without" (10). Therefore, before meaningful conversations about mental health can take place in the classroom, teachers must first choose which texts they think will have the most positive impact on their students and these important conversations.

Popular Titles and Their Limitations

As the rate of mental illnesses continues to increase in young adults while the stigma surrounding mental health remains, teachers are already beginning to look toward YA literature to help start these conversations. For example, English educators have used

novels such as Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* and Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* to discuss topics such as suicide, suicidal ideation, and depression. While I commend these educators for bringing mental health issues to the forefront of their curriculum, I must discuss the problematic nature of these book choices. I believe these particular YA novels fall short in regard to mental health representation and, therefore, may not be accomplishing what teachers originally set out to do.

Thirteen Reasons Why begins with high school senior Clay Jensen finding a mysterious box of audio tapes at his front door. Hannah Baker, Clay's former classmate and secret crush, has recently completed suicide but not before recording thirteen tapes explaining why she made that choice and who she blames. Each person discussed on one of Hannah's tapes must listen to them all, then, pass them on to the next person on her list. As the narrative progresses, alternating between Hannah's voice "live and in stereo" (Asher 7) and Clay's raw, heart-wrenching reactions; the reader, along with Clay, discovers the incidents (big and small) that haunted Hannah and, according to her, ultimately led to her tragic death.

While Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* confronts important topics such as suicide and suicidal ideation, it is difficult to classify this book as a novel that offers authentic mental health representation. Instead, Asher attempts to focus his narrative on suicide without the focus on mental health as well, a choice that proves to be problematic. While it is suggested that Hannah was living with depression, her story is not highlighted as an internal mental struggle. When recording the tapes, Hannah focuses on her anger with those she blames for her death rather than the thoughts she has about herself; therefore, readers only get a few insights into the thoughts and feelings induced by her depression.

Furthermore, readers must view Hannah's story through Clay Jensen's lens, the narrator who listens to Hannah's tapes one by one. Richmond discusses using *Thirteen Reasons Why* for literature circles in an English methods class and claims that "through the tapes and main character Clay Jensen's narrative, readers learn about the effects of depression, bullying, and suicide" (21-22). While I agree that readers can learn about the effects of bullying and suicide while reading this novel, it is harder to argue that they learn about the effects of depression when, as Richmond points out, the story is told through Clay's narrative. Richmond also discusses an activity in which "students were asked to imagine themselves as Hannah Baker before her suicide. On a secret Facebook group, ... they posted 13 pictures and hashtags that Hannah might create before her death" (22). This activity seems to assume that every student in the class would have to "imagine" these feelings, which is likely not true considering 20% of young adults live with a mental illness. Therefore, this activity may place students who do relate to Hannah's experiences in an uncomfortable situation. Furthermore, an activity such as this may help students empathize with young adults experiencing suicidal ideation, but the novel does not provide readers with the means to truly understand Hannah's mental health struggles. Without genuine insights into Hannah's character, we lose an essential part of the story—what it feels like living with depression. This is not to say that this book does not serve as a realistic depiction of teen suicide or as a means of developing empathy for those young adults who experience suicidal ideation due to bullying; however, as an authentic representation of mental illness, it falls short.

Reflecting on his own experiences writing about a character with depression, YA author Francisco X. Stork maintains that author Ursula K. Le Guin was correct in saying,

"one of the things fiction does is lead you to recognize what you did not know before" ("What I Learned"). Because literature possesses this power, it is important to consider what readers may recognize, whether the author intends them to or not, through their interpretations. While reading *Thirteen Reasons Why*, students will hopefully recognize the dangerous effects of bullying and even the signs of suicidal thoughts and remember Hannah's words that "everything ... affects everything" (Asher 202). On the other hand, because of the lack of mental health representation, students might also become conscious of unintended messages such as the idea that suicide is often unrelated to a mental health disorder and, therefore, cannot be treated. According to a study conducted by Lake et al. and presented in their article "Adolescents' Attitudes About the Role of Mental Illness in Suicide, and Their Association with Suicide Risk," only 16.6% of high schoolers who participated in their study believed "Almost all kids who killed themselves are mentally ill" (696). However, Mental Health America reports that "most people who die by suicide have a mental or emotional disorder, [and] the most common underlying disorder is depression." While not all suicides are caused by a mental illness, it is important for young people to recognize the common association between the two, so they understand that mental illnesses are treatable and suicides are preventable.

Furthermore, rather than decreasing the stigma of suicide, the language used within Asher's novel perpetuates this stigma. Clay calls suicide "a disgusting word" (Asher 164), and even Hannah refuses to say the word multiple times throughout the making of her tapes. By reinforcing such beliefs, readers are encouraged to maintain preconceived notions concerning suicide rather than challenge them. Henderson touches on this issue in her article when she discusses the importance of understanding "the

connection between language and its powers of representation; [because] words create realities, and words can hurt" (12). Young adult authors who use language such as this when writing stories about mental illness or any disability experience may do so intentionally to illustrate the harmful consequences these word choices instigate, which creates an opportunity for students to critically analyze and critique this language. Because characters never question this type of language in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, however, and both Hannah and Clay's language suggest a perpetuation of the stigma surrounding suicide and suicidal ideation rather than a critique of it, readers are not encouraged to think critically or question the author's word choices and, instead, may view this language as a reinforcement of the status quo.

For many readers, the most problematic aspect of this novel is the glamorization of Hannah's suicide. By leaving her tapes behind, Hannah is able to "live on" after suicide and encourages her listeners to go on a journey with her, telling them: "Throughout the tapes, I'll be mentioning several spots around our beloved city for you to visit. I can't force you to go there, but if you'd like a little more insight, just head for the stars" (Asher 12). For readers contemplating suicide themselves, it offers an unrealistic message that they can somehow remain present after suicide and even get revenge on the ones who have hurt them. Clay's final reactions to Hannah's tapes also implies that her death has inspired him to grow as a person. As he states at the end of the novel, "A flood of emotion rushes into me. Pain and anger. Sadness and pity. But most surprising of all, hope" (Asher 288). Clay then approaches an old friend who has isolated herself at school and has also shown signs of suicidal ideation throughout the novel. Once again, a harmful message is implied that those who complete suicide can serve as

inspiration for others by encouraging them to become more empathetic people. Ultimately, these narrative choices romanticize the act of suicide rather than offer a realistic depiction of its consequences.

Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* is another popular YA novel that offers a problematic representation of young adults with mental health issues. It follows the unlikely relationship of high school seniors Theodore Finch and Violet Markey. Their relationship begins six stories up in the high school bell tower when Finch saves Violet from jumping despite everyone's belief that Violet saved Theodore "Freak" that day. After the two of them pair up for a class project, Finch and Violet wander the state of Indiana together in search of the "perfect day." While Finch helps Violet cope with her depression after the recent death of her older sister, Finch struggles to overcome the bipolar disorder that he has long lived with.

If there is one thing to appreciate about this novel, it is Niven's ability to create not just one but two characters that capture the raw emotions of what it feels like to be depressed. For Violet, the sudden death of her sister has triggered her depression while Finch's depression stems from, as one reviewer calls it, "deep-rooted mental issues" (Townsend). The term "bipolar disorder" is not used until the second half of the novel, which seems to be a conscious decision made by Niven who repeatedly criticizes labels throughout the story. As Finch emphatically tells Violet at one point, "'I'm not a compilation of symptoms. ... Not a problem. Not a diagnosis. Not an illness. Not something to be rescued. I'm a person'" (Niven 307). Students who are exposed to this novel will hopefully recognize the dangers of defining someone by his or her mental illness, which is one step in eliminating misguided labels and, thus, decreasing

stigmatization. Despite this intended message, however, both Violet and Finch *do* seem to be defined by their mental health struggles. Unlike *Thirteen Reasons Why* which lacks any real confrontation about mental illness, *All the Bright Places* emphasizes the characters' mental illness to such an extent that readers may have a difficult time recognizing Violet and especially Finch as teenagers not unlike themselves instead of as products of their mental illness. As indicated by the first scene (Violet and Finch are both contemplating jumping off the school bell tower) and last scene (Violet visits the place Finch completed suicide), Violet's depression and Finch's bipolar disorder drive the entirety of the narrative, even if their illnesses are not clearly defined at all times. In her article "Mental Health Matters: Addressing Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature," Sierra Holmes addresses the importance of reading books that "are about mental illness, but more than that … are about people who care about their friends and families, plan for their futures, face up to their fears, and struggle to make the right decisions in difficult situations, just like the rest of us—and who also happen to suffer from a mental illness" (68). Stories that perpetuate the "othering" of people who live with any sort of disability, condition, or illness can unintentionally send harmful messages to young readers. For readers who can relate to Violet's and Finch's experiences, these unintended messages may reinforce inaccurate assumptions that they must be defined by their struggles. For this reason, educators should seek YA novels about mental health that emphasize the similarities between their characters' and all young readers' experiences, not the differences.

Because the characters' mental illnesses are continually at the forefront of this novel, this narrative choice may also encourage students to believe they can learn all of

the symptoms of a mental illness such as bipolar disorder and then be able to "diagnose" someone. Teachers using this text may think this is a positive aspect of the novel despite the harmful consequences it can actually have. For instance, Random House Teachers' educator's guide for *All the Bright Places* suggests having students research the common symptoms of bipolar disorder, compare these symptoms to Finch's behavior, and use their findings to answer the question: "Do you think Finch suffers from bipolar disorder?" (Schick). Although an activity such as this can help students reconsider their preconceived notions about bipolar disorder, it also asks students to diagnose Finch's symptoms, which is problematic for a few reasons. First, it implies that everyone who lives with bipolar disorder experiences the same symptoms, which may lead students to view Finch as a representation for all people living with bipolar disorder rather than as one example of a multifaceted experience. Additionally, it reinforces the idea that Finch is defined by his mental illness as students are literally asked to define Finch's character by his diagnosis at the end of this activity.

Perhaps the biggest limitation of this novel resides within its ending. As the novel progresses, it becomes obvious that Finch is struggling to "stay awake," a term he uses to describe being out of a depressive state. Similar to *Thirteen Reasons Why*, before Finch's death, he leaves clues to places he wants Violet to visit, which plays out as a final adventure for the two of them to go on together despite Finch's absence. For many readers, including myself, the ending ultimately romanticizes Finch's suicide and mitigates the tragedy. As Alex Townsend, a reviewer from the blog *Disability in Kidlit* points out, "During this section Violet doesn't question what was going through Finch's mind or the tragedy of suicide. Instead it's all about finding the next whimsical message

and ultimately giving Violet the strength to move on with her life." The author's decision to remove Finch's perspective from the chapters leading up to his death and create a resolution that suggests Finch's death is the impetus Violet needs to overcome her own struggles ultimately produces a romanticized version of events. Townsend, who has experienced depression herself, offers a telling criticism of the book:

> Yes, there are wonderful people like Finch who lose that battle, but that isn't the message that teens need to read about. What anyone with depression desperately needs is hope. We need to believe that we can get better, that we can get to a place somehow where we can function without that little voice saying 'This would all be easier if you just died.' *All the Bright Places* does not leave the depressed reader with that hope. Instead it says, 'If you die the right way, you can end up being an inspiration to others.' (Townsend)

As Townsend indicates, novels—and especially YA novels—that confront mental health have a responsibility to their readers to not only represent mental health in an accurate fashion but to also deliver positive messages about mental health. Also problematic, preceding Finch's death, Violet expresses her concerns for Finch to her parents despite Finch's pleas not to. Soon after Violet speaks to her parents, Finch's body is found. The narrative choice to juxtapose Violet's conversation with her parents and Finch's suicide may deter students from seeking help for a friend or loved one who is contemplating suicide. It is my concern that students would view Violet's decision to reach out to an adult as the impetus for Finch's decision. For educators who wish to include this novel in their classroom, it is important to consider the problematic messages this novel may send to students who find themselves relating to the characters and their experiences.

Furthermore, treatment such as therapy or medication is presented in a negative light the few times it is mentioned in the novel. For instance, when Finch goes to a suicidal teen support group, he's described as seeing "the dull, vacant look of people on drugs" (Niven 283). Also, when Violet suggests therapy to Finch, he gets angry and storms off, which is the last time Violet sees Finch before his death. Townsend argues that "any hint of medical treatment is treated with disgust and outdated ideas." She supports this claim with the following observation: "Finch says that medication will take away who you are or that or a medical label like 'bipolar' will only reduce you to a crazy case-study. This notion is never refuted." Not only do these narrative choices reinforce the idea that Finch is defined by his bipolar disorder, but they also perpetuate dangerous stereotypes about people living with a mental illness and increase the stigma surrounding topics such as medication and therapy. For students reading this novel from an insider's perspective, they may be deterred from seeking professional mental health services. For students reading from an outsider's perspective, they are encouraged to maintain harmful preconceived notions about mental health treatment rather than challenge them.

Ricki Ginsberg, a former high school English teacher and current Assistant Professor of English Education, offers the following discussion questions to pose to students reading this book: "What is the end message of this book? What is the author's purpose? Why do you think Niven ended the book in the way she did?" These questions highlight the importance of the author's purpose and intended message in literature, but the romanticized depiction of Finch's death and the perpetuation of stigmas surrounding mental health-related topics indicate that students' answers to these questions may also highlight the unintended messages this book conveys. For this reason, educators must

also consider the answers to these questions and ensure the novels they include in their classroom challenge preconceived notions about mental health so that all students—those who live with a mental illness and those who do not—can gain a better understanding of the role it plays in young adults' lives and the need for destigmatization.

Evaluating a text in terms of its mental health representation is a crucial step in offering students quality YA novels about mental health. In the following chapter, I will share my evaluation of texts with more positive and authentic representations of mental health such as Emery Lord's *When We Collided*. I will also address the problem that YA novels about mental health often contain white protagonists; therefore, while students living with a mental illness may be able to relate to these texts, it is likely harder for students of color to see themselves and their experiences represented. To ensure all students' experiences are being represented and, thus, validated, I will argue that educators should apply a culturally relevant and social justice framework when approaching the topic of mental health in the secondary English classroom. Applying the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy as defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings ensures that all students' individual experiences and backgrounds are being accounted for, increasing students' likelihood of engaging with the material. Furthermore, if teachers consider the principles of social justice learning when choosing and evaluating novels about mental health, students will have a higher chance of reading texts that encourage not only critical thinking but also action against the status quo and the various stigmas surrounding mental health.

Chapter Two:

Evaluating Mental Health Representation in Young Adult Literature

An Introduction to Social Justice and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Evaluating books about mental health is not an easy feat for teachers, especially since few will have an extensive background in psychology or mental health disorders, but educators can use the principles of social justice and culturally relevant pedagogy to choose texts that will help students productively engage with representations of mental health in the classroom. While a culturally relevant framework takes advantage of the diversity of a classroom and ensures *all* students' experiences are being accounted for, social justice learning examines diversity in analytical ways so that students can work for equality inside and outside of the classroom. I maintain that teaching young adult literature using a combination of both teaching philosophies will help educators effectively confront mental health in the English classroom.

According to Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode, one of the critical components of social justice education is that "it challenges, confronts, and disrupts misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences" (12). Similar to other forms of discrimination, current stigmas surrounding mental health are maintained by misconceptions and a lack of knowledge about mental health, ultimately perpetuating negative stereotypes about those living with a mental illness. Literature about and for young adults is an obvious tool for teachers to use in order to, as Nieto and Bode put it, challenge, confront, and disrupt these misconceptions. In her article "Teaching Social Justice Through Young Adult Literature," Jacqueline N. Glasgow argues that "young

adult literature provides a context for students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations" (54). Therefore, when evaluating YA novels about mental health, teachers should consider texts that encourage students to confront their own ideas and misconceptions about mental health but that do not directly or indirectly perpetuate dangerous misconceptions. Additionally, students should be given the opportunities to analyze multiple perspectives regarding mental health (including insider and outsider perspectives) in order to recognize how mental health affects every individual differently, increasing students' ability to relate to, empathize with, and learn more about mental health experiences. Students must go beyond analysis, however, which is why Nieto and Bode identify another critical component of social justice education: "creating a learning environment that promotes critical thinking and supports agency for social change" (12). Because "agency" is a key term in this definition, teachers should search for texts that not only encourage critical thinking but also inspire students to act and create opportunities for positive social change, whether it be in small or big ways.

Culturally relevant pedagogy attempts to accomplish similar goals while also ensuring students are given the best opportunities for academic success. In her 1994 book *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Students*, Gloria Ladson-Billings describes culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy that "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (17-18). Because culturally relevant teachers understand that students' cultural identities are valuable to the learning process, they use students' individual backgrounds and experiences to shape their instructional approaches rather

than use their instructional approaches to inform students' individual cultures. The objectives of culturally relevant pedagogy, according to Ladson-Billings, include increasing students' chances for academic success, building their cultural competence, and raising their sociopolitical consciousness ("Yes, But How"). By choosing YA texts that students are likely to relate to and find value in, educators already increase students' engagement in the learning process. To build students' cultural competence, teachers should search for texts that allow students to reflect on their own cultural identities while expanding other types of cultural knowledge at the same time. Culturally relevant teaching encourages students to consider how their culture informs their beliefs such as personal perceptions of mental health. Finally, educators can look to the principles of social justice education to develop students' sociopolitical consciousness, which Ladson-Billings defines as "help[ing] students use the various skills they learn to better understand and critique their social position and context" ("Yes, But How" 37). Like social justice learning, culturally relevant teaching encourages students to think critically about the texts they read in order to become aware of social inequities, recognize the systems of power that enable oppression, and discover practical ways in which they can enact positive social change.

According to Ladson-Billings, "Culturally relevant teachers think deeply about what they teach and ask themselves why students should learn particular aspects of the curriculum" ("Yes, But How" 34). Applying a culturally relevant framework when evaluating texts about mental health ensures teachers are considering students' cultural backgrounds to inform their decisions, but we must also consider why it is important for students to be exposed to a variety of mental health experiences. It was this type of

thinking that led me to recognize the danger of only incorporating YA novels about mental health that feature white, middle or upper-middle class protagonists. It is harder for students to recognize their own perceptions of mental health and how their individual culture informs these perceptions if they do not see themselves or their cultural identities represented in the texts they read—an argument that will be elaborated on later in this chapter. Therefore, when confronting mental health in the English classroom, teachers must not only look for texts that offer a positive representation of mental health, but they must also search for diverse and inclusive representations of mental health.

Positive Mental Health Representation in Emery Lord's *When We Collided*

In her book *Against Borders: Promoting Books for a Multicultural World*, Hazel Rochman tells us, "Books can make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building community; not with role models and literal recipes, not with noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling stories that make us imagine the lives of others" (19). In other words, the most effective stories illustrate the realities of life, and it is this authentic portrayal of life that invites readers to confront and challenge beliefs about their own world and the world of those around them who are seemingly unlike themselves. One of the contemporary YA novels that confronts mental health in such an impactful way is Emery Lord's *When We Collided*. This particular novel features majority culture characters and their mental health experiences, but I want to begin with my evaluation of this novel as it represents a positive, authentic portrayal of mental health. After my examination of *When We Collided*, I will then discuss two other YA novels that I have also evaluated as positive, authentic representations of mental health but which feature characters from diverse cultural backgrounds as well. As the 2017 Schneider Family

Book Award winner, *When We Collided* has been recognized for its excellence in embodying "an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences" (American Library Association). *When We Collided* tells the story of Vivi Alexander, who has just moved to the small coastal town of Verona Cove, California with her mom, and Jonah Daniels, a 17-year old townie who is coping with the recent death of his father. While a summer romance blossoms between these two characters, their relationship serves as much more than a typical teenage love story.

Told through the alternating perspectives of Vivi and Jonah, the reader empathizes with Jonah as he struggles to take care of his large family, including his mother, who has fallen into a depressive state, and learns from Vivi's chapters that she, too, is coping with struggles of her own, primarily that of her recently-diagnosed bipolar disorder. While Vivi and Jonah's stories are not meant to serve as a single representation for everyone living with bipolar disorder or everyone who has a loved one living with a mental illness, Lord's decision to offer both perspectives provides students with an opportunity to recognize the different ways young adults are affected by mental illness, helping students relate to, empathize with, and increase their knowledge of mental health experiences. For instance, when teaching this novel in a Young Adult Literature college course, one student reflected on Vivi's realization of the hardships Jonah faces as he struggles to help his mother with her depression and also wants to support Vivi as she learns to live with her bipolar disorder:

> This one quote from chapter 17 I thought was very profound: "I wonder how much this must hurt him, the toll it must take to give more of himself to me when he already has so little left to give." (234). I think that this must be what some

> people with mental health disorders must feel when it comes to their families. I know for a fact that some of them feel like a burden, that life would be easier if they were gone. Of course this is never the case, but I feel as though this aspect of mental health is left unsaid more often than not. We often focus on the afflicted person and not the price that those that love the victim must pay every day trying to be a light in a dark world.[1]

This insightful student response demonstrates the usefulness of ***When We Collided*** in relation to:

1. Building students' empathy for those who live with a mental illness or have a loved one living with mental illness ("I think that this must be what some people with mental health disorders must feel when it comes to their families").
2. Relating their own mental health experiences to Jonah's and/or Vivi's ("*I know for a fact* that some of them feel like a burden, that life would be easier if they were gone") (emphasis mine).
3. Developing a conscious understanding that certain aspects of mental health experiences are not being talked about enough ("I feel as though this aspect of mental health is left unsaid more often than not").

If we observe Heather W. Hackman's five essential components of social justice education---content mastery, critical thinking, action skills, self-reflection, and an awareness to multicultural group dynamics this student is already demonstrating content mastery and critical thinking and is beginning to take the steps necessary for

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[1] Students whose responses are included in this thesis granted me permission to anonymously cite their responses to a variety of online discussion posts; therefore, I have not included student names.

action skills and self-reflection, components that teachers have the responsibility to take further as will be elaborated on in Chapter Three.

To return to Hayn's claim that teachers should incorporate literature that portrays individuals with disabilities, conditions, and/or illnesses as "functional, independent, and proactive role models in realistic settings (9)," *When We Collided* also serves as a positive representation of mental health for this reason. Unlike other YA novels that seem to define a character by his or her mental illness, such as Niven's *All the Bright Places*, Vivi is never defined by her diagnosis. The narrative choice to not reveal Vivi's diagnosis until page 167 proves to be an effective choice, since readers come to know, like, and relate to Vivi before they discover she is living with bipolar disorder. As one reviewer from the blog *Disability in Kidlit* points out, "Many of [Vivi's] struggles will be relatable to teens without mental illness—rebelling against her mother, confronting her feelings of abandonment by her father, finding her place in the world" (Martin). If educators are searching for texts that emphasize the similarities of young adults' experiences and not just their differences, this is a novel that effectively accomplishes that task. After asking students to read Martin's review themselves to gain a perspective from someone who lives with bipolar disorder, many students agreed with her claim that Vivi is portrayed as much more than her mental illness. For instance, one student stated, "I wholeheartedly agree with her appreciation that Vivi did not become bipolar disorder. Lord makes sure to show us more than that about her. She is just Vivi, and bipolar disorder may contribute to her personality, but she has depth beyond that." Student responses such as this confirm my belief that *When We Collided* lends itself to social justice learning. Expanding on Rochman's claims, Glasgow states, "[Rochman] tells us that a good story allows us to see

people as individuals in all their complexity. Once we see someone as a person in all their humanity, then we've reached beyond the stereotype. Good books unsettle us, make us ask questions about what we thought was certain; they don't just reaffirm everything we already know" (54). By analyzing Vivi's character, students are forced to confront their own stereotypes about people living with a mental illness and dispel their preconceived notions as they witness this novel challenge stereotypes about mental health.

Another positive aspect of this novel is Lord's ability to portray a hopeful yet authentic depiction of mental illness. According to Martin's review, "Vivi's struggle with bipolar disorder [is] portrayed accurately and compassionately," and "Lord never glorifies Vivi's symptoms in the way fiction and popular culture often do" (Martin). Through the use of emotional language and literary devices, Lord depicts what it feels like living with a mental illness in such a profound way that a broad range of readers are able to step into Vivi's shoes. Even Vivi's character emphasizes how important this empathy can be when she says, "No one settles inside my shoes—inside my towering, beautiful shoes—and dances around, not even for a minute. No one else looks me right in the eyes and says it like the simple fact it is, depression fucking *sucks*" (Lord 308, emphasis in original). This authentic depiction is also useful for students who are not familiar with bipolar disorder but are still affected by mental illness in some way. In response to a scene in which we witness one of Vivi's manic episodes, one student made this valuable connection to her own experiences with a friend who was recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder:

> I was with her a few months ago when she began to experience a bipolar episode, and it seemed so similar to what Lord describes. My friend was very much on a

> mission, though none of us knew what it was. She had places to be, and we were all standing in her way. I wished so badly that I could be inside her head, to see what she was thinking. I feel like When We Collided gave me an opportunity to do that, and that was really eye-opening for me. [...] It was just deeply significant to me that Lord was able to portray this disability experience in a way that I felt was so faithful to my own experience.

Connections such as this enable students to put themselves not only in the shoes of the characters but also in the shoes of those around them, helping them to develop an empathy and understanding they may not have had before. For students who relate to Vivi's struggles, they gain hope in seeing they are not alone and there is an effort taking place to understand their realities.

Although Lord does not shy away from the often dark realities of mental health, she also provides hope for Vivi and for her readers that it is possible to live with a mental illness and experience, as the author and Vivi put it, "some difficult weeks in wonderful lives" (340). As one student stated in her response to the ending of the book, "It is so empowering to see someone with a mental illness taking charge of their lives, doing what is best for themselves, and coming out on top. That isn't depicted in literature often enough." Furthermore, students are persuaded to believe in the authenticity of this story because Lord wrote it from a personal place. In the Author's Note, Lord reveals her own struggles with mental illness and encourages students not to stay silent about mental health. One student commented on the significance of Lord's insider perspective: "Her message of resilience became much more powerful when I read that she had persevered through similar hardships. Readers can look at her like Vivi looks at successful people in

the book: as a real life vision of hope." When applying a social justice framework to the teaching of novels such as Lord's, messages of hope are vital in encouraging students to enact change. Hackman tells us that tools for action and social change are "critical to help move students from cynicism and despair to hope and possibility" (106). Providing students with texts that demonstrate this hope and possibility is the first step in enacting social justice learning in the English classroom. Lord's message also relates to an important principle of social justice education that Hackman emphasizes: "Educators need to disrupt the notion that silence is patriotic and teach students that their rights as citizens in this society carry responsibilities—of participation, voice and protest—so that this can actually become a society of, by, and for *all* of its citizens" (106, emphasis in original). As we have seen in very recent history[2], young adults' voices are powerful, and students must be encouraged to raise their voices if we wish to see the positive change they can undoubtedly bring to this world. It is no question we are not talking about mental health enough and, as Lord emphatically puts it, "if we're not talking about it enough, how can we possibly shine enough light into places that can feel very dark and very lonely?" (338). In order for students to thrive, educators must help bring students out of these shadows and into a place that values their stories and voices.

The Need for Diverse and Inclusive Representation

While many contemporary YA novels like *When We Collided* do an excellent job portraying mental illness in young adults and, thus, can help break stereotypes of mental illness, diverse and inclusive representation in these novels is lacking. In particular,

[2] At the time this thesis was written (2018), a student demonstration to protest gun violence and support tighter gun control had just taken place around the U.S. with the main event taking place in Washington, D.C. This demonstration is referred to as "March for Our Lives."

students of color and students of low socioeconomic status are often underrepresented in these texts. The *School Library Journal* (Jensen) and ALAN (Scrofano, "YA Novels") offer recommended titles for tackling mental health with YA literature. Included on one or both of these lists are the three titles I have examined: *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *All the Bright Places*, and *When We Collided*, each of which contain white, middle or upper-middle class protagonists. To represent other mental illnesses besides mood disorders, these lists also offer titles such as Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls* (eating disorders), Sophie Kinsella's *Finding Audrey* (anxiety disorder), and Tamara Ireland Stone's *Every Last Word* (OCD). Once again, each one of these novels features a white, middle or upper-middle class protagonist. Although this assertion is only based on two reading lists, my observations are not dissimilar to other YA literature studies that have been conducted. For instance, in 2009, Melanie Koss and William Teale conducted a study on YA literature trends and found that "the majority of the books represented only one general cultural group, most frequently European American" (566). Based on their findings, Koss and Teale maintain that "the lack of cultural diversity in YA literature indicates that educators ... need to make special efforts to seek out and use quality books that include diverse characters" (570). Since, almost ten years later, we are still experiencing a lack of diverse and inclusive representation in some areas of YA literature and in the books students read in their high school English classes, teachers should apply a culturally relevant understanding to their curriculum and use this pedagogical framework to inform their decisions regarding the texts they choose.

The 20% of young adults who live with a mental illness are not all members of the dominant cultural group; yet, it seems that only members of the dominant cultural

group can find themselves widely represented in YA literature about mental health. The reality is, however, *all* people are at risk of developing a mental illness, and some minority groups are even at a higher risk. For instance, "according to the Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, African Americans are 20% more likely to experience serious mental health problems than the general population" ("African American"); according to Mental Health America, 21% of Americans who identify as Native American or Alaskan Native had a diagnosable mental illness in 2013 ("Native American"); and "Latinos are identified as a high risk group for depression, anxiety and substance abuse" ("Depression"). Furthermore, "people who live in poverty are at increased risk of mental illness compared to their economically stable peers" (Entin). Despite these statistics, it is difficult for young adults outside of the dominant group to find representation of themselves in literature about mental health. When representations of mental health exclude people from non-dominant groups whose experiences may not resemble the experiences of dominant group members, it is difficult for them to identify with the characters they read about.

As Rudine Sims Bishop powerfully demonstrates in her essay "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," reading "becomes a means of self-affirmation" when students are able to see themselves in the books they read (1). For students living with a mental illness, YA books about mental health validate their experiences and lets them know they are not alone. For students of color living with a mental illness, they may be able to relate to books about mental health featuring a white character, but, as Bishop would say, it is difficult for these books to transform from windows into mirrors for all students. According to Bishop, "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the

books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" ("Mirrors" 1). Teachers who wish to embody a culturally relevant philosophy understand this danger and, thus, choose texts that serve as authentic mirrors for minority students, reminding them that their cultural identity is valued not only in the classroom but in the larger society as well. For students who are part of the dominant cultural group, reading books about other cultural groups is also beneficial, even necessary, for them. As Bishop tells us, "They need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans" ("Mirrors" 1). Applying a culturally relevant understanding such as this helps students develop cultural competence and a critical consciousness. When applying this understanding to the issue of mental health, students will not only gain a broader knowledge of mental health experiences but will also learn to value the similarities and differences between these multifaceted experiences.

In her article "You Cannot Be What You Cannot See: The Critical Importance of Representation in Literature For Minority Students," Catie Childress further explains why diverse and inclusive representation in literature is essential for students. Childress maintains that "when students see themselves represented in the literature they read in school it helps them create a counter narrative about themselves." According to Childress, "a counter narrative at its most basic level is an argument that disputes a commonly held belief or concept. In the case of representation as a counter narrative, representation helps students see themselves in non-stereotypical ways." Creating a counter narrative is especially important when confronting issues of mental health

because while those living with a mental illness are already subject to stereotypes and stigmatization, minorities must face other stereotypes and stigmas surrounding mental health as well. For instance, according to NAMI, "in the African American community, many people misunderstand what a mental health condition is and don't talk about this topic, [which] leads many to believe that a mental health condition is a personal weakness or some sort of punishment from God" ("African American"). NAMI also reports that people who identify with the Latino community seldom talk about mental health issues and may be unaware of the signs and symptoms of mental illness; therefore, Latinos are less likely to seek mental health treatment. In fact, "a 2001 Surgeon General's report found that only 20% of Latinos with symptoms of a psychological disorder talk to a doctor about their concerns, [and] only 10% contact a mental health specialist" ("Latino"). For American Indian and Alaska Natives, "access to [mental health] services is very low with individuals having a negative opinion of non-Indian services providers and thus utilizing more traditional healing methods" ("Depression"). A 2005 study published by the National Institute of Mental Health suggests that minorities who develop a mental illness are more likely to go untreated, which may be due to the stigma often attached to mental illness by people of color (Gordon). Because of these realities, the lack of representation in one of the few places that is talking about mental health—YA literature—may actually increase the stigma of mental illness in minority groups rather than decrease it.

On the other hand, if minority students are given opportunities to read about characters with whom they identify—characters who experience the symptoms and struggles of mental illness but who also offer hope for living with and treating mental

illness—they will gain a broader knowledge of mental health and can then begin to rewrite these narratives. In her essay, "Who Am I? Who Are You? Diversity and Identity in the Young Adult Novel," Lois T. Stover maintains, "For students who represent minority perspectives within the larger U.S. society, young adult novels about adolescents from those cultures and reflective of their ethnic backgrounds provide validation of their own experience" (101). This validation is especially important for students who feel they do not receive mental health support at home, in their community, or in the larger national conversation about mental health. Once students' individual experiences are validated, they can then begin to confront their own perceptions of mental health and create positive counter-narratives. Furthermore, narratives based on lived experiences rather than stereotypes allow *all* students in the classroom to dispel preconceived notions about cultural experiences unlike their own and, instead, use these authentic narratives to form new ideas about their identities and the identities of others. In their article "Counter-Narrative as Method: Race, Policy and Research for Teacher Education," H. Richard Milner IV and Tyrone Howard argue that "the narrative can bring people from different perspectives and walks of life together in the classroom and can serve as a pedagogical tool to empower individuals who live and experience different lives into spaces where they understand themselves, the other, and themselves in relation to the other" (540). Facilitating such pedagogical practices helps eliminate prejudiced beliefs and creates a safe, inclusive learning environment, both of which are necessary for social justice learning (Nieto and Bode 12). Counter-narratives, in particular, are critical for students of color, for they can "contribute to the knowledge base of those often pushed to the margins in education" (Milner and Howard 542). When students of color

are provided the opportunity to create counter-narratives that challenge the harmful untruths portrayed in other narratives, they are able to find validation and value in their cultural identities while also eliminating the hegemonic nature of the stories often presented in academic settings.

While many of the popular YA novels about mental health do feature white protagonists, it is possible to find diverse and inclusive YA novels about mental health that accurately portray mental illness and authentic mental health experiences. Just choosing a novel with a diverse character, however, is not enough. Childress explains:

> It is important to make sure the literature that is being selected does not depend on stereotypes to create diverse characters. One of the easiest ways to do this is to use literature that is written by minority groups. Not only does this give students an honest portrayal of what it's like to belong to a minority group, you can trust the portrayal because it comes from first person experience.

This argument is especially relevant when choosing books about mental health as there is potential for multiple layers of authenticity. For instance, one of the reasons why Lord's *When We Collided* is such an excellent representation of mental health is because of the author's own experiences with mental illness--experiences that inspired her to write this novel and deliver hopeful messages about mental health. Students reading from an outsider's perspective can feel confident knowing Lord has the credibility to create authentic depictions of mental health experiences. Additionally, students reading from an insider's perspective may find even more validation knowing the author is writing from an insider's perspective as well.

To add another layer of authenticity, when incorporating texts about mental health that feature characters from diverse cultural backgrounds, teachers should consider titles that have been written by an author from the same diverse group, since these authors are able to offer more authentic insights into the specific culture being represented. Educators can look to Rudine Sims Bishop's definition of "culturally conscious books" to determine which texts will work best for the purposes of culturally relevant and social justice pedagogy. When examining children's books in relation to the depiction of African American experiences in literature, Bishop states that authors of culturally conscious books "set out to reflect both the distinctiveness of African American cultural experiences and the universality of human experience" ("Reflections" 7). Culturally relevant teaching insists that students must be able to see their culture in the curriculum, understand that their culture is one of value, and be encouraged to maintain that culture (Milner). Culturally conscious books ensure this validation takes place and help students develop cultural competence by allowing them to learn more about their own culture while also helping them view their culture in relationship to the dominant one. This is not to say books written from an outsider's perspective cannot or should not be considered, but educators should be aware of the cultural knowledge a writer possesses when evaluating and choosing texts to incorporate into their curriculum.

Diverse Mental Health Representation in Erika L. Sánchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*

One text that can help English educators meet the objectives of culturally relevant and social justice pedagogy is Erika L. Sánchez's YA novel *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. This National Book Award Finalist tells the story of 15-year old Julia

Reyes as she struggles to understand the strictness of her Mexican mother, dreams of escaping her poor neighborhood in Chicago, and copes with her overwhelming depression and anxiety—all of which has been augmented by the recent death of her older sister. When listening to Sánchez speak about her novel at the 2017 ALAN Workshop, she explained how important it was for her to write this novel because of the high suicide rate for Latina youth. In fact, "Latina teenage girls have more depressive symptoms than...African American or Caucasian girls and the rate of attempted suicide is higher" ("Depression"). For Latina youth living with a mental illness, this powerful novel can validate their experiences and offer an authentic character for them to relate to and identify with. Before I continue my evaluation of this novel, I do want to address the mature content within it such as scenes including sex, drug and alcohol use, and mature language. While this content may make some educators hesitant to bring this novel into the classroom, I argue that it contributes to the authenticity of the text and does not detract from the value this novel holds. As YA author Sam J. Miller tells us, "When we tell the truth about who we are and what we've been through, not everyone will like it. Adults may think that young people need to be shielded from these ugly truths, as if hiding from horror will make it disappear." The reality is, however, these issues are real and present in young adults' lives, and students have the right to see these issues represented in the literature they read. Therefore, while teachers should take measures such as parental notice and administrator support when teaching Sánchez's novel, the mature content should not deter educators from using this text.

I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter is an exemplary example of a culturally conscious book and a story that represents #ownvoices, a movement started by author

Corinne Duyvis that recommends YA literature about characters from diverse cultural backgrounds written by authors from that same cultural group. Like the protagonist Julia, author Erika Sánchez is a daughter of Mexican immigrants and also struggled with depression as a teenager (Franklin). Because of her personal experiences, Sánchez is able to create an honest portrayal of what it is like growing up within two clashing cultures, giving her the opportunity to tackle important topics such as mental health, immigration, and cultural identity through authentic prose. First generation young adults can relate to Julia's disdain when her mother tells her she has "become too Americanized" (Sánchez 26), and teens living with a mental illness can empathize with Julia's simple yet profound words: "'It's okay,' I say, even though it's not. That's just what you're supposed to say. I'm fine! I'm fine! I'm fine!" (Sánchez 73). For Latino/a youth, this novel enables them to create a counter-narrative about themselves and their cultural identities—an opportunity that Sánchez purposefully wanted to afford her readers. In an interview with Daniel Olivas from the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Sánchez expressed the importance of this counter-narrative: "the world needs to know that brown girls can be intellectual, that they can have complex inner lives. We're not a homogenous group of people like the media would lead you to believe." Julia's experiences as a first generation Mexican American and as someone living with depression and anxiety contributes to this complexity, but her desire to become a writer, move to New York, and attend a prestigious university also contributes to her complexity; and even this description of Julia's character does not do her multifaceted character justice. Nevertheless, this counter-narrative allows for, as Milner and Howard put it, "a complex picture of the oppressed storyteller to emerge" (543). Thus, Julia's story helps validate the lived

experiences of non-white readers and may even encourage these students to be more vocal about their own stories. This openness is especially important for teens who remain silent about mental health due to fear of stigmatization or a lack of knowledge on this issue.

While Sánchez's novel is especially beneficial for Latino/a students, all students can benefit from the reading of this novel. In another interview, Sánchez notes how important it is for young people "to read different narratives about people so you can understand what it's like to be them" (Franklin). As stated previously, well-written, authentic stories help readers develop empathy, and Sánchez's novel accomplishes this goal in more than one way. Not only do readers develop empathy for children of immigrants, but they also develop empathy for the young adults who deal with overwhelming grief or mental illnesses like depression and anxiety every day. Because Julia's character is so relatable for the majority of young adults, not just Latina teens or teens living with a mental illness, it is easy for readers to develop this empathy. For instance, many teens can relate to Julia's desire to escape the suffocating control of her parents or the contempt she feels for constantly being reminded by her mother that she is not as "perfect" as her older sister was. Julia's words "I can't ever be the person she wants me to be" (Sánchez 235) are likely to resonate with many young adult readers. These universal conflicts allow students to recognize the similarities between their experiences and the experiences of someone who, at first, seems very different from themselves. As Ladson-Billings states, culturally relevant teaching is to "*use* student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge" ("Reading" 314, emphasis in original).

By allowing students to use their own experiences to confront issues such as mental health, students not only broaden their knowledge of these issues but also learn how their cultural identities influence their perceptions of these issues.

Furthermore, while some reviews criticize Julia's character for being too angry—"contemptuous, judgmental, and unpleasant," as one *Kirkus* review puts it—it is unreasonable to believe young adults do not have valid reasons or the right to be angry. The *Kirkus* review also states that "it is difficult to root for Julia" because of these character traits; however, I argue that her flawed character makes Julia even more realistic and relatable for young adults and especially young adults living with a mental illness. According to the Mayo Clinic, some common symptoms of teen depression include: an irritable or annoyed mood; frustration or feelings of anger, even over small matters; angry outbursts; disruptive or risky behavior; and other acting-out behaviors. It is important to note, though, that Julia also recognizes these behaviors at times and tries to find coping methods such as writing. For young adults living with depression, Julia's indignant yet authentic demeanor may validate their own mental health experiences and encourage them to find coping methods that work for them. For readers who have a loved one living with depression, Julia's story may help them better understand the symptoms of depression and develop greater empathy for those trying to cope with these symptoms. In his book *Necessary Noise: Stories About Our Families as They Really Are*, Michael Cart reminds us that "[young adults] need to learn how the *other* can become *us*," (emphasis in original) and one way to accomplish this empathy is "through reading fiction that captures—artfully, authentically, and unsparingly—the circumstances of kids" from diverse cultural backgrounds (qtd. in Hayn 9). To begin the social justice

learning process, it is vital for students to challenge their previous worldviews, and literature such as *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* encourages students to do this as they reflect on their own perceptions while also viewing the world through another person's eyes.

Another valuable aspect of this novel in regard to its mental health representation is the positive depictions of therapy and medication. At the height of one of Julia's depressive episodes, she attempts suicide by cutting herself. After her suicide attempt, Julia starts seeing a psychiatrist. While she is hesitant to receive therapy at first, she begins to recognize its value, telling the reader, "I always look forward to seeing Dr. Cooke, even though I often leave her office feeling like someone ripped my chest open" (Sánchez 316). Dr. Cooke becomes someone Julia can trust and open up to; and by allowing the reader to witness Julia's therapy sessions, Sánchez demonstrates the importance of receiving professional help for her readers who may be living with a mental illness. Julia's meetings with Dr. Cooke also help readers confront possible misconceptions about mental health therapy. For instance, Dr. Cooke wants Julia to know that she is in control of her situation, telling her, "You have to look inside of yourself and decide what's best for you. I'm only here to offer options, to give you the tools to make the right choices for yourself" (Sánchez 318). For many young adults, and especially young adults living with a mental illness, being able to control their circumstances is important, and Julia's experiences with mental health treatment lets the reader know this is possible. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for people living with a mental illness to avoid taking medication, whether because they do not believe they need the medication or for fear that it will cause unwanted side effects (Treatment Advocacy Center). Julia

challenges this narrative, however, by responding positively to her medication such as when she says, "My depression and anxiety have softened with the medication. My moods still dip every once in a while, but there are times I'm actually happy, not just tolerating life" (Sánchez 329). Unfortunately, there are misconceptions that "all psychotropic medication turns the people who take it into dull, numbed creatures," and these misconceptions "can lead people to resist taking medication that could help them (Scrofano, "Not As" 17). Therefore, educators must be careful to incorporate novels that dispel rather than perpetuate these harmful perceptions. Finally, because of the low number of Latinos who seek mental health treatment, the positive depiction of therapy and medication in this novel can be especially beneficial for Latino/a students who have little knowledge or fallacious beliefs about mental health services. By incorporating texts such as *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, educators are not only providing students with inclusive representation, but they are also providing them with vital resources such as "the necessary social and cultural capital to negotiate the world" (Nieto and Bode 12).

Diverse Mental Health Representation in Matthew Quick's *Boy21*

Despite the value that texts such as *When We Collided* and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* hold, teachers run the risk of creating a single story about people living with a mental illness if students are exposed to only one mental health narrative. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie tells us, there is danger in the "single story" because not only does it create stereotypes, but it also "robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar." To avoid these unintended yet harmful consequences, teachers

who wish to confront mental health in the classroom must provide students with a variety of stories about diverse mental health experiences. For this reason, I want to discuss one more text teachers can bring into the classroom, which is Matthew Quick's *Boy21*, a notable novel that addresses the effects of trauma in young adults. In *Boy21*, narrator and protagonist Findley relies on basketball to get him through high school despite the harassment he endures for being the only white kid on the varsity basketball team. As his senior year approaches, however, his starting position is threatened by the new kid, Russ, who has just moved to Findley's town after the death of his parents. Findley has been tasked to help Russ adjust to his new life, which proves to be difficult, since Russ now only goes by the name Boy21 and claims to be from outer space. Much to Findley's surprise, it does not take long for him and Boy21 to develop a friendship, one that benefits from Findley's introverted nature and his acceptance of Boy21's "strange" behavior.

From the onset of the novel, readers are able to understand Russ's behavior as symptomatic of his PTSD which developed after the brutal murder of his parents. Through Findley's narrative, readers are also able to witness Findley's changing perceptions—perceptions that encourage students to confront their own ideas about mental illness—as he learns more about Russ's story. At times, Quick's language choices may appear problematic such as when Findley states, "It's like Russ has created a force field of weirdness around himself" (46), and one of the basketball players exclaims, "This fool's *crazy*" (143, emphasis in original). Rather than using this language to perpetuate stigmas about mental illness, though, Quick deliberately uses this language to demonstrate how this type of language contributes to the discrimination against people

living with a mental illness. As Stover argues, works that approach prejudiced language or actions carefully can be "useful in promoting discussion about significant social issues because while the characters may not interact with others in ways free of prejudice, the authors present realistic individuals who must wrestle with their limitations—and who provide a mirror in which readers may examine their own behaviors" (107). Analyzing these social issues on micro and macro levels is an essential step in the social justice learning process (Hackman 105) and encourages students to take responsibility of their own perceptions and actions and how they may contribute to social inequities. As the novel progresses, Findley develops empathy and an understanding of Russ's situation, which is illustrated through his changing attitude toward Russ and his behaviors. For instance, Findley begins to see that Russ is "using space as some sort of shield—as a layer of words that allows him to express himself honestly almost in camouflage" (Quick 115) and understands that "deep inside his brain there is a war going on—a war that he's losing" (Quick 123). As Findley expresses his thoughts, the reader, too, builds empathy for Russ and broadens their knowledge about what it means to live with PTSD.

Throughout the novel, the reader suspects that Findley may be struggling with his own mental health as well, but unlike Russ who has created an alternative reality for himself as a coping method, Findley refuses to talk about his past trauma. Toward the end of the novel, Russ begins to improve as a result of his renewed interest in basketball and the therapy sessions with his psychiatrist, but Findley is only starting to confront his own depression. By juxtaposing these two characters' experiences with mental health, a white teenager living in a poor, mob-ridden town and a black teenager who comes from an affluent family and neighborhood, Quick's narrative allows students to discuss mental

health in conjunction with other identifiers such as race and socioeconomic status. For African American young adults experiencing mental health struggles, seeing Russ talk positively about his therapy sessions may encourage them to seek professional help. Russ normalizes therapy for Findley and, thus, the reader too by telling him, "I really think it might help. I talk to my therapist all the time. You should probably be talking to a therapist too" (23). However, some students may wonder if Russ is only able to receive these services because of his social class status, and this is one reason why it is important to provide students with multiple narratives. In *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, for example, Julia is part of a working-class family, but her story demonstrates that her social class does not prevent her from receiving the medication and treatment she needs. This is not to say that students should not have discussions about how socioeconomic status affects one's perceptions of mental health or his or her access to mental health services (after all, culturally relevant and social justice teaching insists that students should have these conversations), but these discussions should not suggest that poor students cannot or should not seek mental health treatment.

To facilitate conversations about how mental health is viewed in various communities including different social classes, students can also observe Findley's changing attitude toward talking about his own mental health problems. While Findley refuses to talk to anyone about these issues at the beginning of the novel, he eventually realizes, "Maybe that's why the bad stuff happens in neighborhoods like mine, because no one talks" (230). Not only is Quick able to write Findley's story from an insider's perspective as someone who has lived with depression and anxiety, but he also understands what it feels like to stay silent about these experiences. In an interview with

Publisher's Weekly, Quick admitted how afraid he was at first to talk about his mental health struggles stating, "In the neighborhood I grew up in, a man did not admit those things, so that was a huge thing for me to get over" (Ritter). Despite this initial fear, he also described this experience as "freeing" and now "feel[s] comfortable talking about mental health with anybody" (Ritter). Like Lord and Sánchez, Quick is able to create authentic prose and dialogue that captures not only what it feels like to live with a mental illness but also what it feels like to live with a mental illness in silence. For Findley, it takes an empathizing friend like Russ to encourage him to open up about his experiences, and it is my hope that books like *Boy21* will serve as this same encouragement for students secretly living with a mental illness. Furthemore, all students will hopefully acknowledge the danger of staying silent about issues such as mental health and be encouraged to take action against this silence, in their individual communities and in the larger conversation about mental health as well.

If we expect our students to reflect and act on these social issues, we must consider their individual experiences and the cultural knowledge they already bring to the classroom. Using a variety of texts like *When We Collided*, *I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, and *Boy21* is an effective way to start these conversations, but if English educators truly wish to confront mental health with a culturally relevant and social justice approach, choosing the right texts is not enough. Therefore, the following chapter will focus on *how* educators can incorporate these novels into the classroom and offer practical activities and assignments educators can use to successfully meet the objectives of culturally relevant and social justice pedagogy.

Chapter Three:

A Practical Approach to Teaching YA Novels about Mental Health

If educators wish to change the current conversations about mental health and help eliminate the stigma surrounding mental illness, it is not enough to simply incorporate books about mental health in our classrooms; we must also think about *how* we teach these texts. While choosing quality texts is an important step in this process, educators must not depend on the texts to speak for themselves. As Gloria Ladson-Billings points out, "a culturally relevant teacher does not take the book as a given. Rather, the teacher asks himself or herself specific questions about what reading this book is supposed to accomplish" ("Yes, But How" 34). Once again, I argue that by applying the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy to their instructional approaches, secondary English educators can confront mental health in a way that accounts for and reaches *all* students. Furthermore, by using the tenets of social justice education, teachers can help students critically analyze the sociopolitical issues surrounding mental health. Using Hackman's "Five Essential Components for Social Justice Education," I hope to offer practical ways in which educators can use the texts discussed in Chapter Two to help students develop cultural competence and a sociopolitical consciousness, so they may not only have a better chance for academic success but also begin to take action against the social inequities regarding mental health.

Addressing Educator Concerns

Before I discuss how teachers can incorporate YA novels about mental health into the classroom, I must address one major concern of many high school educators: how can teachers implement such texts amidst a preexisting expectation to follow a set

curriculum? Ladson-Billings addresses this concern and acknowledges that while culturally relevant teachers understand certain skills and content must be taught to their students, they also understand that state and local standards often fail to include the experiences of all students, which can be detrimental to student learning ("Reading" 318). Therefore, Ladson-Billings maintains that culturally relevant teachers "purposefully design curriculum that makes their students (and their heritage) the focus of curriculum inquiry" ("Reading" 318). Culturally relevant teachers understand that preexisting curriculums are often an artifact of the dominant culture and, thus, perpetuate hegemonic systems of power. By embracing classroom diversity and revising the curriculum to account for all students' cultures, culturally relevant teachers challenge these systems of power. Furthermore, as Delane Bender-Slack points out in her article "Texts, Talk … and Fear? English Language Arts Teachers Negotiate Social Justice Teaching," educators who wish to incorporate social justice learning recognize that "the literary canon structures an imaginary shared culture, perpetuating cultural models accepted by and passed down from teacher to student, from generation to generation" (188). The idea of using school curriculum to inform students' cultures contradicts the primary goals of culturally relevant teaching. Relying on an "imaginary shared culture" ignores students' individual cultures, which ultimately devalues them. After observing past scholarship that examined successful African-American students (see Fine and Fordham), Ladson-Billings, as discussed in her article "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," noticed an unfortunate common thread: "the students' academic success came at the expense of their cultural and psychosocial well-being" (475). Culturally relevant teachers seek to increase students' academic success by taking advantage of their cultural

identities, not at the expense of them. On the other hand, when teachers introduce diverse contemporary works such as YA literature into the curriculum, students are more likely to see their own lives and experiences represented, helping them to recognize their cultural identities and those of others from various culturally diverse backgrounds as valuable not only to the learning process but to larger society as well. I do not pretend that changing or adapting curriculum is an easy feat for teachers. While some educators are lucky enough to have this freedom, many teachers who wish to have more control over the material they teach will likely need to make proposals, discuss desired changes with their department, and seek approval from administrators. For educators who are not able to make changes to the curriculum, I recommend seeking ways in which the existing curriculum requirements can be supplemented. Because culturally relevant teachers care about their students as individuals and recognize that pre-established curriculum guidelines inhibit some students' learning, they are willing to take extra steps to ensure all of their students have the best chance for academic success.

The difficulty teachers experience when wanting to introduce new texts into the curriculum does not have to be kept secret from their students. In fact, to begin the social justice learning process, teachers can have a conversation with students about why certain texts are taught and why it may be necessary to introduce more contemporary texts into the curriculum. Bender-Slack maintains that "social justice teaching should study the values and politics behind educational decisions" (189), and I believe students should have a say in these decisions as well. Teachers might begin this discussion by asking students where they see themselves represented in the school curriculum. Since it is likely that not all students will be able to answer this question, teachers can facilitate a larger

conversation in which students explore the reasons as to why this lack of representation exists and how they can address this issue in their classroom. When introducing YA novels about mental health, teachers can ask students to specifically reflect on YA literature and where they see themselves represented in these texts. Since students are more likely to be able to answer this question, teachers can, once again, facilitate a larger conversation concerning the lack of YA literature in the curriculum. These conversations may even lead to the creation of classroom goals, something that is often only created by the teacher. As Bender-Slack states, "teacher agency can lead to student agency" (187), and when students are encouraged to demonstrate agency in the classroom and take ownership of their work, they are more likely to succeed. Furthermore, if students are asked to think about these choices through a critical lens before they begin reading the text, they will hopefully have a better understanding of how they can continue to think critically about the text and the issues it presents throughout the reading process.

Another concern educators may have when confronting mental health in the English classroom is choosing a text that some students might feel uncomfortable reading. For instance, a student with bipolar disorder may be reluctant to read *When We Collided* if he or she believes Vivi's story will be triggering for him or her, or a student who has recently experienced suicidal ideation may feel uncomfortable reading *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. While YA literature is meant to foster personal connections with its readers, educators must be sensitive to students' concerns about reading a text they identity *too* much with. For this reason and others, I recommend educators with such concerns incorporate texts about mental health in a literature circle unit or in a self-selected text unit. Literature circles allow multiple texts and stories to be

discussed in the classroom without students having to read each novel. While I have not discussed the following titles in this project, two other YA novels I would recommend for such a project include Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, a story about 15-year-old Craig Gilner and his five day stay at a psychiatric hospital, and Francisco X. Stork's *The Memory of Light*, which follows 16-year-old Vicky Cruz after her recent suicide attempt. Incorporating a self-selected text unit may prove to be more challenging, but educators can accomplish the same objectives as previously discussed if they are willing to take the extra measures necessary to ensure a successful learning opportunity. For example, teachers may want to provide students with a list of novels they have evaluated as positive and authentic depictions of mental health. If educators do not want to solely focus on mental health representation, they can expand the list to YA novels that include a wide range of portrayals of disability. As Hayn reminds us, "Young adult authors who focus on the tumultuous adolescent years offer a venue for those with and without disabilities to realize what they share in common" (10). Once again, however, teachers have the responsibility to make sure the texts their students read challenge preconceived notions about experiences unlike their own rather than enforce them. Instructional methods such as these also ensure multiple stories are being told and represented, which, as discussed previously, is essential when addressing mental health experiences. Even if students are not reading multiple novels themselves, teachers can facilitate lessons in which students discuss their assigned or selected novel with one another, allowing all students to interact with the various mental health experiences currently being represented in YA literature.

Literature circles and self-selected reading opportunities also allow teachers who have little room for curriculum revisions to incorporate more contemporary texts. Another way in which educators can work with the existing curriculum is by supplementing YA novels with canonical texts. For instance, English educators teaching *Romeo and Juliet* may supplement the play with Lord's *When We Collided*. Both texts juxtapose the themes of romance and mental health and feature important mental health topics such as suicide, suicidal ideation, and depression. Students can also use these texts to analyze how the characters' mental health struggles are perceived by themselves and by the people around them and what these perceptions tell us about how mental health was viewed in Shakespeare's time and how it is viewed today. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is another canonical text often included in high school English curriculums. Teachers could pair this text with Sánchez's *I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* as both texts juxtapose the themes of cultural identity and mental health. Students can analyze Okonkwo's and Julia's characters to discuss how conflicting cultural identities may affect one's mental health. Pairing these texts together also encourages students to consider how mental health topics such as mental illness and suicide are perceived differently in various cultural communities. While students can think critically about these issues through the cultures presented in the texts, they can also apply this understanding to their own individual cultures. While a number of canonical texts feature characters experiencing mental health struggles, students may have a difficult time reading these texts as authentic representations of mental health or connecting to the characters' experiences on a personal level, since they are neither about young adults nor originally written for them. On the other hand, pairing these canonical works with

contemporary YA novels allows students to still gain the literacy benefits of reading classic texts while also confronting important social issues such as mental health in a contemporary and relevant manner.

Using Heather W. Hackman's Five Essential Components for Social Justice Education

To demonstrate practical ways in which teachers can accomplish the goals I have set out throughout the course of this thesis, I will draw on Heather W. Hackman's "Five Essential Components for Social Justice Education," which not only offers an inclusive approach to social justice learning but also addresses the call for culturally relevant teaching. Hackman argues that "a specific course of classroom implementation" is vital in helping teachers effectively incorporate social justice learning into their curriculum; therefore, she offers five components--content mastery, critical thinking, action skills, self-reflection, and an awareness to multicultural group dynamics--to clarify this approach (103). Most educators agree that students must take on an active role during social justice learning, but Hackman argues that a more inclusive definition is needed to enact true social justice education. Therefore, she offers the following definition: "Social justice education does not merely examine difference or diversity but pays careful attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to social inequality, and encourages students to critically examine oppression on institutional, cultural, and individual levels in search of opportunities for social action in the service of social change" (104). In other words, social justice education must go beyond awareness. Like culturally relevant pedagogy, social justice education wants students to be aware of the social inequities that exist in their world but also recognize the systems of power that

enable this oppression, so they may then discover practical ways in which they can enact positive social change.

Much of this thesis has already discussed what Hackman refers to as content mastery, which is not just the acquisition of information but, more specifically, the acquisition of information that represents "a range of ideas and information that go beyond those usually presented in mainstream media or educational materials" (105-6). Because the mainstream media often presents mental illness as a taboo subject, romanticizes topics such as suicide, and dismisses minority mental health experiences, presenting students with a range of authentic mental health experiences is essential in building content mastery. Additionally, Hackman argues that students must be able to understand not only how the material relates to their own lives but also how it relates to larger issues in society. She suggests that "both students and teachers need to be able to answer the question: 'Why is this information important on both a micro and macro scale?'" (106). Therefore, I suggest that teachers set the groundwork for this type of thinking before diving into the texts themselves. For instance, before teaching *When We Collided* in our Young Adult Literature course, I asked students to discuss their previous experiences with mental health conversations including whether they had read any texts that feature characters with a mental illness, whether mental health had ever been a topic of discussion in their school or classes, where they see mental health conversations taking place today, and how these conversations are or are not changing. While I wanted students to think about the role mental health plays in their own lives and communities, I did not want students to feel obligated to reveal any personal mental health experiences; however, a handful of students did choose to share this information with me and their

classmates. Moreover, I wanted students to begin thinking about the topic of mental health on a societal level and what issues needed to be addressed as we approached this topic via YA literature. These questions allowed students to immediately reflect on current problems surrounding discussions and representations of mental health. For instance, many students commented on the fact that mental health was only ever discussed in their high school health classes; and as one student pointed out, "[The class] tended to treat it as being less serious than physical illnesses, or less 'real', and sometimes they gave information that was just wrong." Other students reflected on the importance of positive mental health conversations in relation to other social issues such as one student who stated, "Concerning the youth of America, I think [mental health] discussion is only going to spread. People have realized the importance of listening to an individual in need due to the current spike in school shootings." A discussion prompt such as this maintains cultural relevance because it reminds students that they bring valuable knowledge and experiences to the conversation; it also ensures students gain a broader knowledge of the issue at hand by asking them to think about the subject of mental health on both micro and macro levels.

In addition to understanding the content on multiple levels, Hackman maintains that students must also think critically about the content and, specifically, use this information "to critique systems of power and inequality" (106). This type of critical thinking, according to Hackman, includes "focusing on information from multiple, non-dominant perspectives, and seeing those as independently valid and not as an add-on to the dominant, hegemonic one" (106). As mentioned previously, multiple stories of mental health experiences must be present in the classroom for students to engage in this type of

learning. With diverse texts such as *When We Collided*, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, and *Boy21*, teachers can facilitate activities in which students analyze and compare the protagonists' mental health experiences. For instance, teachers may ask students to analyze the expressive language each protagonist uses. Students reading *When We Collided* can analyze the figurative language Vivi uses to describe her emotions when experiencing a depressive or manic episode; students reading *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* might analyze the poem Julia writes and shares with her therapist (Sánchez 330-331); and students reading *Boy21* can compare the language Findley and Russ each use to express what it feels like living with past trauma. Students should also consider how the characters' cultural identities contribute to these experiences. For instance, students will want to consider how Julia's identity as a first-generation Mexican American impacts her mental health and how factors such as race and socioeconomic status contribute to Russ and Findley's different mental health experiences despite the fact they are both young adults living with PTSD. Students can then share their analyses with one another to discuss how these diverse perspectives enhance their understanding of mental health.

To continue this critical thinking process through a social justice lens, Hackman argues that students should analyze how power and oppression affect the issue at hand (106). Juxtaposing diverse narratives about mental health increases students' ability to recognize these effects. For example, these three novels allow students to see how one's socioeconomic status affects how one copes with a mental illness. When discussing each protagonist's experiences with mental health treatment, students should notice that the two upper-middle class characters, Vivi and Russ, are the only two characters who have

access to treatment (medication or therapy) throughout the entirety of the novel. On the other hand, the characters of a lower socioeconomic status, Julia and Findley, struggle to receive mental health services throughout the majority of their narratives. In addition to analyzing this inequity through the texts, teachers can also encourage students to discuss the systems of power that enable this type of social inequity by asking them to draw text-to-self and text-to-world connections. To facilitate this conversation, teachers might use the questions Thandeka K. Chapman et al. offer in their article "A Social Justice Approach as a Base for Teaching Writing." When reflecting on issues of social justice, they ask their students three questions: "What concerns you? Which of these issues concerns your families and communities? Do these same issues distress the world on a global level?" (540). As students analyze the social inequalities regarding mental health through writing, they not only engage in the type of critical thinking Hackman calls for, but their responses also offer topics and issues to consider when approaching the next step of the social justice learning process—action and social change. As Chapman et al. maintain, "In the English language arts classroom, social justice is a way to increase students' abilities to articulate their experiences, critique their world, and address those identified issues with subsequent action" (540). When addressing mental health in the English classroom, each step provides students with an authentic learning experience where they learn the skills necessary for academic success and are given the opportunity to apply these skills to real world situations.

Since some of the main purposes of bringing mental health conversations into the classroom include breaking stereotypes about mental illness, helping eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health, and encouraging positive conversations and action, the

activist component of social justice learning is essential to this process. I believe the most effective social justice learning opportunities are proposed and led by the students themselves. Educators should take note of the concerns students highlight as they think critically about issues of mental health and help students create a plan of action to addresses their specific concerns. Hackman explains that it is necessary to intentionally teach students these tools "because most students in our public and private educational environments are taught to feel disempowered, complacent, or hopeless" (106). Educators can help students dispel these beliefs and replace them with feelings of hope and possibility, however, by providing them with the knowledge and resources they need to turn their thoughts into action. If students express concerns that their school does not do enough to support students with mental health problems, for instance, teachers can encourage students to seek out ways in which they can address this concern. For example, students might decide to evaluate the mental health resources in their school counseling office and suggest ways these resources can be improved to administrators or counselors. Students might even create their own list of resources on flyers or posters to distribute around the school. After reflecting on their personal experiences or the texts read in class, students who want to ensure students of color feel represented may specifically seek out resources that address people of color and mental illness. For instance, students might advertise the People of Color & Mental Illness Photo Project, an online project that seeks to end the stigma surrounding mental illness and change the way mental health is often treated as a "white man's disease" by encouraging people of color living with a mental illness to submit a photo of themselves holding up a sign (Vargas). While students should not feel required to take part in the photo project themselves, this resource and the

powerful quotes people include in their photos can help students of color see they are not alone in their experiences and, thus, feel validated.

As many of my students highlighted during our reading of *When We Collided*, a big reason why mental illness is stigmatized is because of our reluctance to talk about mental health. The following sentiment from one student was not uncommon to hear as we discussed mental health representation in YA literature: "I know that now more than ever that mental health is an important issue amongst America's youth, but I don't quite know how to go about talking about it." If students express similar concerns in the secondary English classroom, they should be encouraged to explore ways in which they can make mental health a larger part of the conversation about current social issues. For instance, teachers might introduce students to Text, Talk, Act, a text messaging service that helps students become part of the national dialogue on mental health. According to their website, "Through text messaging, small groups receive discussion questions to lead them through a conversation about mental health" ("Text, Talk, Act"). Students can choose to participate in this activity with their classmates to better understand *how* we can hold productive conversations about mental health. If they wish to encourage others to take part in this national conversation as well, they can create different forms of media such as flyers, social media posts, or videos to inform their community about this useful service.

If teachers want students to connect their activist component more explicitly to the literature being read, they may look to Diane Scrofano's idea to ask students "what direction the literature should go to better represent them and address the challenges they face" and "what kinds of stories of mental illness should be told in the future" ("Not as"

20). Such writing prompts draw on what Hackman refers to as "social change through writing and literacy development" (106). While all students can be asked to provide written responses to these questions to continue demonstrating their critical thinking and analysis skills, students who feel especially strong about their responses might be encouraged to submit letters to book publishers expressing a need for specific types of representation. Students can participate in this conversation more informally by expressing their ideas through social media using the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks, a movement being widely followed by various children's and young adult publishers, authors, and readers around the country. By exposing students to this movement and resource, they may also discover other ways in which they can use their voice and experiences to influence a global industry. As Ladson-Billings states, "the primary goal of culturally relevant teaching is to empower students to examine critically the society in which they live and to work for social change" ("Reading" 314). Literature has a large influence on the society in which we live, and giving students the opportunity to critique this aspect of society not only helps students build their cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness but also reminds them that, as young adults, their voices matter and are capable of creating positive social change.

As Hackman points out, many teachers who engage in social justice learning often stop after these three components; however, Hackman maintains that true social justice education also requires teachers and students to engage in personal reflection and, specifically, reflection that acknowledges one's social identity and position. For example, dominant group members must recognize their position as one of power and privilege and understand the important part they play in "challenging and changing [prejudice] in the

U.S" (Hackman 107). When addressing mental health in the classroom, students should be encouraged to reflect on their social identity and position not only in terms of ability but also race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. and how their personal and cultural identity affects their perceptions of mental health issues. One way students can engage in this type of critical thinking is through reflective writing. According to Hackman, "utilizing pedagogical tools, such as reflective writing exercises and assignments that connect content to student lives, teachers can extend the importance of self-reflection in their classrooms and build the habit of critical self-reflection into the educational repertoire of students" (107). When reading *Boy21*, for example, teachers can ask students to put themselves in Findley's shoes and reflect on how they would react to the task Findley is given to befriend Russ. Rather than pretending to be Findley, though, students should consider how their own identities would influence their thoughts and actions. For instance, if I were completing this activity, I would need to recognize my position as a white, middle-class female with no serious mental illness and how my identity not only affects my perceptions of mental health but also how it might affect my perception of Russ, a black, upper-middle class male with PTSD. This activity is not meant to solely highlight the differences of people and, thus, convince students they cannot understand or empathize with people who look or live differently than them; rather, it reminds students that despite these differences, we are able to—and have the responsibility to—seek ways in which we can better understand, empathize with, and value the experiences of others. As Hackman tells us, "lack of self-reflection locks all of us, no matter what our social identities, into places of passivity and powerlessness," but "having the self as a site for change is a useful way to prevent the feelings of

hopelessness and powerlessness that students sometimes encounter when discussing macro-level social issues" (107). When teachers help their students see themselves as a site for social change, the classroom becomes a learning environment conducive to social change as well. Once this environment is established, both teachers and students can then begin focusing on creating solutions to the problem rather than simply the problem itself.

The final component of effective social justice education, according to Hackman, is an awareness of multicultural dynamics. She describes this awareness as an "understanding [of] group dynamics of the classroom and the socially constructed identities of the teacher and students," which then "determines how social justice educators will approach the previous four dynamics" (Hackman 108). In other words, there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to social justice education; just as our students are multifaceted beings with a variety of diverse experiences, our instructional approaches must be multifaceted too. Therefore, while I have offered some practical examples of how teachers can approach YA novels about mental health in a culturally relevant manner, social justice educators understand that these approaches will need to be modified depending on the cultural dynamics of their classroom. For instance, in an all-white classroom, teachers may spend more time on conversations about systems of power and privilege and students' self-reflections on these issues as they pertain to their own social identities. According to Hackman, this differentiation is essential if teachers wish to take advantage of "the true potential of student-centered teaching and social justice education" (108). Many teachers will agree that student-centered learning is an effective way to increase students' chances for academic success and, therefore, should be a priority in the classroom, but educators must ask themselves if their current notions of

student-centered learning account for *all* of their students and not just those students whose identities coincide with the traditionally hegemonic nature of student learning. While an awareness of multicultural dynamics is important, Hackman also reminds us of this: "Critical and ongoing discussions regarding diversity and social justice issues affect *all* of our lives and therefore should be an integral part of the classroom regardless of its make-up" (108, emphasis mine). I firmly believe that mental health is one of these issues that affects all of us and, therefore, deserves a place in the secondary English classroom. As mental illnesses become more common in young adults, as news stories continue to address issues of mental health in our country, as social media increasingly becomes a site for people to share their stories, and as different forms of media attempt to bring mental health to the forefront of social justice conversations, silence about mental health in the school classroom is no longer an option.

At this point, I hope I have made clear the importance of maintaining a culturally relevant approach when teaching YA literature about mental health and using these pedagogical tools to implement social justice learning. As Katie Rybakova et al. tells us in their article "Teaching Controversial Young Adult Literature with the Common Core," "the goal for raising hard topics in the classroom via YAL is for students to recognize injustice, question the status quo, develop their own opinions about others, and learn how to overcome the angst and pains of adolescence" (39). By teaching YA texts about mental health students can relate to yet which simultaneously offer new perspectives for consideration, students can increase their understanding of the sociopolitical factors that influence their current views about mental health and work to analyze these issues with a more critical lens. Most importantly, students can begin to take action and challenge the

stereotypes, stigmas, and social inequities surrounding mental health, helping us create a more safe and inclusive environment in the schools we learn in, the communities we live in, and the world we coexist in.

Conclusion

In a short time, I will return to the high school English classroom with the following statistics in mind: 20% of youth ages 13-18 live with a mental illness; 50% of students age 14 and older with a mental illness drop out of high school ("Mental Health Facts"); and in 2015, 8.6 percent of youth in grades 9-12 reported that they had made at least one suicide attempt ("Suicide"). For many teachers like myself who have witnessed the mental health struggles of students first-hand, these statistics are much more than numbers—they are the realities for students who sit in our classrooms every day. Despite this understanding, educators often feel uncomfortable and unprepared to confront mental health in the classroom. These reasons should not deter teachers from addressing tough subjects but, rather, encourage them to find appropriate and engaging ways to approach the topic of mental health with their students. After all, students will continue to deal with these difficulties in their daily lives whether we choose to confront them or not.

While it is my hope that talking about mental health issues in the classroom will prevent students living with a mental illness from doing so in silence, I understand that this conversation must impact every student if we wish to enact positive social change. The stigma, stereotypes, and prejudiced beliefs concerning mental illness are pervasive. Glasgow reminds us that "since these topics [of intolerance] have worked their way into American culture, the attitudes connected with each find their way into the minds, if not the hearts, of American young people" (54). Therefore, this conversation is equally important for the students who are not directly impacted by mental illness. I acknowledge that some people will continue to believe the topic of mental health, if addressed in schools, should be reserved for the health classroom; however, I hope I have

demonstrated here the power that well-chosen YA literature holds in dispeling dangerous ideologies. Because the ELA classroom provides students with the opportunities to not only read these stories but also think critically about the issues they present, I maintain that secondary English teachers have as much, if not more, of a responsibility to tackle these difficult topics with their students. I echo Groenke et al. and their hope that "by raising hard topics in the classroom through young adult literature, we can encourage our students to notice and stand up to injustice, question the stories they hear about others, and demand new stories when necessary" (30). Until we give students the opportunity to take this stand, however, we cannot expect them to challenge the preconceived notions and beliefs they bring into the classroom.

As elaborated on throughout the course of this thesis, discussing issues of mental health through diverse and inclusive YA literature addresses the need for culturally relevant teaching and social justice education. I would be remiss, however, if I did not emphasize the importance of practicing these pedagogies in all aspects of one's teaching, not only when confronting mental health. Ladson-Billings describes culturally relevant teaching as "a long-term commitment" because "although we may have only a yearlong interaction with students, we ultimately have a lifelong impact on who they become and the kind of society in which we all will ultimately live" (Yes, But How" 40). Like many teachers, I entered into the education field hoping to have a positive, long-term impact on the students I teach, yet I question whether my previous instructional practices were capable of creating this impact for *all* of my students. I often failed to see the curriculum as an artifact of the dominant culture and, thus, did not recognize my teaching strategies as a perpetuation of dominant ideologies. As I move forward in my teaching career, I

have made the conscious decision to reflect on, evaluate, and modify my instructional approaches according to my students' individual needs and culturally diverse backgrounds, even if that means stepping out of my own comfort zone.

When I return to the high school English classroom, I no longer plan to address mental health reactively. While I will do all that I can to help the student who is concerned for her friend's well-being, the students who use creative writing as means of expressing their mental health struggles, and the student who suddenly loses his interest in school; I hope to confront mental health proactively, so students will no longer feel the need to endure these struggles alone and in silence. When we read *Things Fall Apart* or *Julius Caesar*, I will no longer view the suicides present in these texts as simple literary choices but, rather, as opportunities to discuss how these literary choices relate to our perceptions of mental health today. I will reenter the classroom knowing I have a responsibility to my students—a responsibility to address an issue so many of them are either directly or indirectly impacted by every day. I will confront the stigma of mental illness head on by introducing contemporary texts into the curriculum, encouraging students to use their own lives and experiences to think critically about these texts, and helping students develop the necessary tools to change the way we think and talk about issues of mental health. I will also use these conversations to help my students realize the responsibility they have---the responsibility to care for, empathize with, and value one another and the unique lives they each live. For other educators who wish to make this same commitment to their students, I hope you will join me in this endeavor so that we may not only increase our students' chances for academic success but also encourage them to become more active, empathetic, and resolute human beings.

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